

let's melissa feineman dating

my polka-face: one step forward, two steps back is the japanese first date ditty

In Japan, meeting someone of the opposite sex often works in kind of a parallel universe to the way it happens in the West. Everything seemingly transpires as you might expect, but then suddenly, inexplicably things go wonky. This is nowhere more apparent than in the early stages of a relationship, or what some may refer to as "a first date". Allow me to share a few anecdotes to illustrate my point.

I met Mr. T in the way that many great Japanese romances begin - he was my student. At the time, I was teaching in a rural area where the majority of my classes were filled with housewives or junior high school students, but Mr. T was a rarity - someone who was not a decade older or younger than me, who also happened to be a tanned, athletic university student.

It starts out innocently enough. We talk about his dissertation and why he hates studying English (note to students everywhere: this is not the recommended way of wooing your teacher). But it soon becomes apparent that there are many more topics that we'd like to discuss in a less... sterile environment, so we decide to go out after hours for some extracurricular fun.

We meet up, go for a romantic walk, and talk for hours. When it's time to head home, we both hop on the train together since we're heading in the same direction. This is where it gets weird. As we approach my station, he turns to me, the tension in the air almost palpable, and reaches out to... shake my hand? I'm startled, but the train's jingle warning that the doors are about to close urges me to respond immediately, so I shake his proffered hand and stumble off the train, thoroughly confused. I rack my brain. At what point did the evening feel like a meeting between business associates? Even a weak wave or a head nod would have made more sense than a *handshake*.

Moving on to Scenario 2: Mr. DJ is spinning at a local club, and I can't help but notice his adorable dimples. I've never been particularly aggressive when it comes to approaching men, but my time in Japan has taught me that sometimes you have to do your best *tanuki* impression (i.e., grow some balls) if you want to accomplish anything in the dating world. I'm also feeling emboldened by my recent progress in Japanese class, and, let's be honest here, a drink or two.

After he finishes his set, I approach him and start a conversation. We cover the obvious topics of where I'm from and what I'm doing in Japan, and before I know it, he's asking me if I have a boyfriend and what my type is. Result! Or so I think. But then he disappears for a moment, telling me there's someone he wants to introduce me to, and comes back with his female friend in tow. Hmm... I don't think I've mixed up the words for "boyfriend" and "girlfriend", and I don't even know how to say "lesbian" in Japanese, so I don't think he's trying to set us up. But why, when things are going so well between us, would he interrupt the conversation to introduce me to his friend?

In both situations, things seem to be progressing in the romantic direction, when suddenly the guy calls things to a halt and cools down the tension by a factor of about 10,000. What's that all about? Now, your first reaction may be (and I hope I'm not infringing on any copyrights here), "He's just not that into you." However, as both of these relationships eventually became romances, I can assure you that's not the case.

The best I can tell, there is some sort of code whereby men in Japan feel they can only go so far when they first meet someone or are in a first date situation.

If you want to simply pick someone up for the night, you can certainly do that, but if you actually see yourself starting a relationship with someone, you need to perform some sort of polka where you take one step forward and then a few steps back in order to assess the viability of the relationship before it even starts. You need to be able to shake someone's hand before you can kiss them, and you definitely need to know if your friends like someone before you know if *you* do.

Welcome to the weird and wonderful world of dating in Japan.

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